European View (2015) 14:69–75
DOI 10.1007/s12290-015-0343-9

ARTICLE

Why it is time to redesign our political system

Pia Mancini

Published online: 3 June 2015

Abstract Modern political systems are out of sync with the times we are living in. While the Internet allows us unprecedented access to information, low costs for collaborating and participating, and the ability to express our desires, demands and concerns, our input in policymaking is limited to voting once every two to five years. Innovative tools, both online and offline, are needed to upgrade our democracies. Society needs instruments and processes that allow it to choose how it is governed. Institutions have to be established that reflect today's technological, cultural and social realities and values. These institutions must be able to generate trust and provide mechanisms for social debate and collaboration, as well as social feedback loops that can accelerate institutionalised change.

Keywords Digital democracy · Institutional innovation · Open source · Internet politics

Introduction

A lot has been said about the impact of the digital world on science, technology and the entertainment industry. However, little attention has been paid to innovation—or lack thereof—in the political system. This article argues that the political system is out of sync with the times. It explores the causes of this and proposes some avenues for institutional innovation. The aim is not to propose a solution or a roadmap. Rather, it is to ask the questions that need to be asked

P. Mancini (✉)
The DemocracyOS Foundation, 361 Lytton Ave. (Suite 200), Palo Alto, CA 94301, US
e-mail: pia@democracyos.org

and push the boundaries in terms of what could be done, all in the hope of moving the debate forward.

The Internet is bringing about a seachange in how citizens expect to be represented. Governments, however, are unable to keep up with the changes that it has provoked in our societies. The world changes by the second, and yet our governments are still only receiving citizen input every two, four or five years, depending on the system. Modern democracies are based on information technology that is five hundred years old, the printing press.

With this information technology, the best possible system that could be designed was one whereby a few make daily decisions for the many, and the many vote on who represents them once every few years. Long-term representation made sense at a time when citizens could not participate in the decision-making process. This was not physically possible, nor did the citizens have access to the information required to make informed decisions.

One could argue that, in the eighteenth century, someone like John Adams knew pretty much everything there was to know about running a country, but that is far from true today. The increased complexity of the issues we face, from climate change to the global financial markets, makes it impossible for our representatives to come up with innovative and long-term solutions on their own. We are in the middle of a global crisis of representation. Governments simply do not seem to be able to respond to the demands of our rapidly changing society.

Technological connectivity has multiplied access to and circulation of information at a very low cost. Conversations that used to be one-to-many have become many-to-many. The Internet has the potential to transform us all into producers as well as consumers of information, and we can now participate remotely in any global conversation.

This connectivity has lowered the barriers to accessing information and knowledge, and allows us to better express ourselves. However, our political systems expect us to be passive recipients of a monologue. Put simply, we are twenty-first century citizens trying our best to interact with institutions from the nineteenth century built on technology from the fifteenth century.

Conflict is thus bound to occur between, on the one hand, citizens—who are increasingly used to representing themselves in every other aspect of their lives through new information technology tools—and, on the other, a political system that has no capacity for dialogue. It is no wonder that political institutions like parliaments and traditional political parties are topping the charts for the least trusted institutions. This distrust will only deepen as the millennials start to come of age.

We seem to be moving towards a new model of state and society, but are clueless as to what it is or what it should look like. It is time for institutional innovation. We need to rethink how we organise our democratic life. Democracy is a work in progress. We need to set ourselves free of the structural and institutional dogmatism of the status quo. Innovation requires iteration and recursive processes that incorporate feedback.

Today's technology will allow us to design institutions that incorporate social feedback loops in order to correct themselves. Building a collective process for innovation and experimentation and thus broadening our ability to participate in public life could be a viable part of the changes made. This would ensure that entrenched defendants of the status quo are more easily disarticulated and would avoid crisis-led transformations which are currently the only avenue for making changes to rigid structures.

One idea for institutional innovation

A new world view never completely changes or replaces the old one; therefore, innovative tools, both online and offline, are needed to accommodate and manage the conflict between them.

Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore (2001, 22) claim, 'politics offers yesterday's answers to today's questions'. One way of innovating in the political system is to rethink and rewire it using a combination of online tools and a new kind of political party. Such a party plays by the existing rules but radically changes the way in which it makes decisions in parliament by taking advantage of new tools to make decisions in collaboration with the citizens.

DemocracyOS and the Net Party (Partido de la Red) from Argentina are two examples of such a combination. DemocracyOS is an open-source voting and debating platform, whereby citizens can learn about, debate and vote on how they would like their representatives to vote on political issues. The Net Party ran for election in 2013 in Buenos Aires, having made a public commitment to always vote in Congress in line with the decisions of those citizens that have engaged with DemocracyOS. This effort is the largest open-source attempt to bring nineteenth-century institutions into the twenty-first century.

The Net Party has yet to win a seat in Congress, but its impressive first performance in 2013 (where it gained 1.2 % of the votes) (GCBA 2013) won it a seat at the table. The Congress of the City of Buenos Aires introduced a pilot of DemocracyOS in 2014, and a bill that had been dormant for years—one to improve working conditions for nurses in public hospitals—was introduced through the citizens' use of DemocracyOS.

This idea is growing beyond Argentina and beyond political parties. DemocracyOS has been successfully used by a local non-governmental organisation in Tunisia to debate the constitution; by activist groups in Ukraine, Spain, Australia, Canada, France, Chile, India, Puerto Rico and Peru; by a grass-roots movement in San Francisco advocating for, among other things, affordable housing; and by a union for Uber drivers. Many other examples could be given.

Democracy cannot simply be a system that aggregates preferences one on top of the other. Healthy and robust public debate should again be one of democracy's fundamental values. Citizen input as part of an ongoing decision-making process can produce innovations that an established political body would consider unthinkable. This is the nature of power. It is always conservative and risk averse: it wants to hold on to power.

Therefore, a space to persuade and be persuaded, to debate, to imagine and innovate, and to reach consensus, as well as to provide structured ways of channelling dissent, must be designed. It may be that not everyone is ready to vote on and discuss every issue. Therefore, it is proposed that this idea should incorporate liquid democracy, a highly dynamic institutional arrangement. In this space, if someone does not feel comfortable voting on a certain issue, he or she could delegate his or her vote to another citizen for that particular topic. The goal is to produce a dynamic and emerging social leadership, in which representation is not based on territory but on trust and knowledge. In this way, a new system of horizontal and strategic representation can be pursued.

Citizen control in this kind of representation system could be infinitely fine and dynamic. For example, someone could choose to hand over voting power on health-care issues to a well-known medical practitioner at a public hospital, retain votes on economic matters, delegate environmental decisions to a trusted non-governmental environmental organisation and delegate all other issues to his or her local political representative.

But technology by itself is not enough. Social change does not simply come from knowing the facts but from being organised and doing something with that information. Social change stems not from our ability to protest but to articulate and offer alternatives that challenge the existing institutions. Innovative political parties could become the nuts and bolts of this transition because political parties are the natural connectors in our current political system.

DemocracyOS and the Net Party are an attempt to kick-start a conversation about how to build democracies that are able to experiment and how to re-create this at different levels of government using flexible systems that can adapt more quickly and easily to change. They are part of an effort to widen the realm of possibilities to help create a deeper understanding of the present and build a path towards the future.

Trust

The underlying role of institutions is to build trust in society. We trusted political parties to interpret and aggregate our preferences and channel them up to their leadership to make decisions that benefit a substantial portion of society. We trusted our central banks to exchange paper with one another as a value-transference protocol. Institutions like police forces and the justice system mediate trust amongst citizens.

This trust is broken. The younger the age group, the less trust there is in the existing institutions. Any institutional innovations need to aim to build trust in society. Distributed organisations and protocols for decision-making, such as DemocracyOS and the Net Party, face the challenge of generating trust in a distributed way, without depending on a centralised authority.

Incipient but exciting technologies such as the Blockchain could provide the infrastructure needed to build distributed trust. The Blockchain can be described as a public ledger that is hosted in a distributed way on every computer

connected to its network. Transactions (e.g. user A sends a bitcoin to user B) or decisions (user A voted 'yes') are publicly certified in the ledger.

Online decisions require independent accountability in order to be trustworthy. The Blockchain is a very interesting protocol—and it is not the only one—in how it guarantees accountability: it is a decentralised ledger that can certify the reality of any kind of event that happens online. Therefore, any user, without needing to request the permission of an organisation, could validate and count every interaction or vote that is made by an online application. Thus, instead of a centralised institution mediating trust amongst citizens, everyone participating in the network accomplishes this.

As the Internet evolves as a medium for human organisations of all sorts, these kinds of protocols will be used to guarantee trust online. And, on these, a new generation of institutions and digital governance tools can be built.

Are we ready?

When I talk about DemocracyOS, I am repeatedly asked whether I think we can trust citizens to make important decisions. This question always makes me think of Aesop's fable. A fox jumps up to try to reach a bunch of grapes. After a few unsuccessful attempts, the fox says out loud, 'Well, it doesn't really matter. Those grapes are sour anyway.' And internalising this idea, it walks away. Even if one day the fox were to be become capable of reaching the grapes, it would not actually attempt to do so. In its mind the untasted grapes will be forever be sour.

In her book *The Nature of the future: Dispatches from a socialstructed world*, Marina Gorbis (2013) argues that, when facing the complex reality of our contemporary societies, we have been subject to rational ignorance. This is the perception that, since our opinion is just one in a million and our ability to effect change is close to zero, the benefits of participating and being truly informed do not outweigh the effort required. The result of this is that we decide to outsource our citizenship to a group of professional citizens, allowing them to make decisions for us for immensely long periods.

Since the early Greek democratic experiences, citizens have been told that they are not able to decide matters for themselves. We have outsourced our citizenship, our thinking, as a result of being forced to do so during the Middle Ages and having been convinced that it was the right thing to do since the eighteenth century. We have abdicated our most important responsibility: that of deciding our destiny.

As a consequence, two processes have unfolded. First, like the fox, we have internalised the notion that we are not capable of making those decisions for ourselves. We have happily given the task to someone else and have then had to suffer the consequences. Second, we have built institutions that frame and enhance this outsourcing process. As a consequence, our system is concerned with the game taking place amongst professional citizens rather than with providing the means, resources, institutions and norms for all citizens to fully participate in the game. Reducing our participation in the democratic process to

voting and allowing this to take place only once every two, four or five years are probably the most blatant examples.

However, political institutions are not designed in the void: they respond to the social, technological and cultural realities of their time. We, both as individuals and as a society, are able to transcend the framework provided by existing institutions. That is why we can innovate. Therefore, we are responsible for upgrading political institutions to reflect our current values and to keep experimenting and innovating to adapt to new realities. We are not bound to the institutions we design; we have collective power over them.

What would have happened if, for example, the founding fathers of the US system of government, instead of concerning themselves with how to build a system based in the competing power of different forces in order to moderate passions in decision-making, had racked their brains to find a way to educate society to become responsible, engaged and participating citizens, able to make those decisions themselves? They designed a technology for government based on the ideal of ensuring that citizens could decide between the best possible set of counterbalanced options. What sort of system would we have today if, instead, they had designed a government based on the ideal of ensuring citizens could collaborate to design the best possible options?

Our political system needs to create spaces for interaction that favour empathy, debate and collaboration. Experiments in net or liquid democracy may rewire from the inside the way politics works—and speed up the way change happens within the system. The true potential of digital institutions, in other words, lies in reshaping what people can do. We can now open up the discussion and debate to an audience that does not have to be able to fit in a small room.

The question is not whether I believe citizens can be trusted, but rather, how do we design processes and experiences that produce that trust and responsibility through educating, informing, opening up and incorporating?

Conclusion

We, the citizens, will never know that we can be trusted until we shed over two thousand years of history and start reaching out for those grapes. It will be a long and trying process, but it is one that we simply cannot afford to ignore. We are at a turning point in history where new technology is allowing us to rethink how we govern ourselves and what institutions we should build to reflect today's technological, cultural and social realities and values. We are not bound to our political systems. They can be reinvented by rewiring them with the tools that technology affords us now. Innovation and experimentation are ongoing exercises in an open democracy.

In the introduction of *The Federalist Papers*, Hamilton (1788) writes: 'It seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or

whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.'

This time it is up to our generation. But it has always has been up to us.

References

GCBA (Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires). (2013). Resultados generales elecciones CABA 2013. http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/justiciayseguridad/elecciones/resultados-electorales/2013. Accessed 30 April 2015.

Gorbis, M. (2013). *The nature of the future: Dispatches from a socialstructed world*. New York: Free Press.

Hamilton, A. (1788). General introduction. In A. Hamilton, J. Madison, & J. Jay (eds.), *The federalist: A collection of essays written in favour of the new constitution, as agreed upon by the federal convention* (pp. 1–4). New York: J. and A. McLean.

McLuhan, M., & Fiore, Q. (2001). *The medium is the massage: An inventory of effects*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Classics. First printed 1967.

Pia Mancini *is co-founder and Executive Director of the DemocracyOS Foundation, peer and co-founder of the Net Party, formerly Chief Adviser to the Deputy Secretary of Political Affairs for the Government of the City of Buenos Aires.*